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SUBJECT: COM MEETS WITH FORMER SLOVENE PM ANTON ROP

Classified By: COM Thomas B. Robertson Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. In his first meeting with COM, former PM Anton Rop was forthcoming on his views for the future of his party, the challenges faced by the current government and Slovenia's close ties to Europe. He views his new role as leader of the main opposition party as an opportunity to regroup and revitalize the party. He plans to be a vocal opposition to the new center-right government, as he has already demonstrated on the issue of Iraq. Rop defended his party's handling of privatization during its decade-plus in power and he envisions a Slovenian economy more closely modeled after Austria or Germany than the transition economies of Eastern Europe. Rop also indicated he would like to visit the U.S. this summer to talk politics and strategy with his counterparts in Washington. End Summary.

CONSUMMATE POLITICIAN

12. (C) Ambassador hosted former PM Anton Rop, currently a member of parliament and President of the Liberal Democracy Party (LDS) for lunch February 3. DCM and Pol/Econ Chief attended, however, Rop came alone. Nearly 4 months after a surprisingly big loss, Rop seemed to have identified and acknowledged some weaknesses of his campaign. Nevertheless he exuded confidence (some would say arrogance), and he has begun the process of regrouping his party in preparation for upcoming key elections including those for Mayor of Ljubljana and President of Slovenia (2006). Rop is cleaning house in the LDS, attempting to put his loyalists in positions of importance within the party and moving out dissenters and dead wood. He said that after 12 years of continuous power, there were a lot of hangers on who were not really committed to the party, and that they needed to go. With the goal of reasserting LDS primacy on the national political scene, Rop said the party was focusing on its grass roots supporters across the country, and he suggested that LDS, perhaps, would run former Foreign Minister Vajgl as a candidate for Mayor of Ljubljana and even as President of the Republic in 2006, when, according to Rop, current President Janez Drnovsek is likely to decline to seek a second term.

13. (SBU) When asked about his view on the accuracy of polling in Slovenia, Rop said that it was essentially worthless, his private polling included. He had met with U.S. consultants to California Governor Schwarzenegger who told him the methodologies used in Slovenia were severely flawed, based on their investigations. As a result, Rop hired a French consultant to do private polling. This information turned out to be equally flawed. Rop's great regret was that he did not take up the offer of election planning software extended by Senator Tom Harkin during Rop's 2004 visit to Washington. He asked if we could help him to get in touch with the National Democratic Institute since he would like to visit the U.S. mid year to talk politics and campaign strategy, and he would also like to provide some of his party members with campaign training.

A VOCAL OPPOSITION

14. (C) Saying that he saw benefits to being in opposition, Rop was very clear that LDS would be a vocal opposition, on foreign affairs as well as domestic affairs. The Ambassador asked him about his recent reaction to the Jansa statement in Brussels which suggested Slovenia would reconsider its contribution to international efforts in Iraq. Rop's position was that absent French and/or German participation, he could see no reason for Slovenia to chart an independent path to putting soldiers in Iraq. He did allow that he could lose the battle and Jansa, with NATO cover, could win over public opinion. Jansa would have to pay a political price, but that is to be expected. Rop added that he would probably call for an "advisory" referendum, i.e. non-binding, should Jansa try to take Slovenia into Iraq as part of the coalition with the U.S. Should Slovene soldiers be part of a NATO mission in Iraq, Rop did not anticipate raising the stakes to the point of calling a national vote.

FURTHER PRIVATIZATION NOT NECESSARY

15. (C) Reflecting on domestic issues, Rop presented a vigorous defense of the LDS' handling of privatization over the last decade. Somewhat disingenuously, he told the

Ambassador that privatization had been largely completed. (Note. He failed to acknowledge the various indirect ways in which the state exerted influence on major industries, such as through government pension funds. End Note.) He also made excuses that the picture is worse than originally planned because some companies that were privatized early on had received substantial loans from the Government, which were then repaid with shares of the same company. The GOS could not refuse this method of repayment because allowing the companies to shrink or go bankrupt would only exacerbate an already critical unemployment situation in some parts of Slovenia - a result LDS (and others) found politically unpalatable. Rop suggested privatization of some banks and other primary targets such as telecom did not occur because the GOS did not trust that new ownership would run the companies to Slovenia's advantage. For example, Rop sees Slovene banks as an important inroad into the southeast European economies that he would not want Slovenia to lose. Again, he drew a comparison with France and Germany to justify significant state ownership of enterprises, suggesting if it works for them, why shouldn't it work for Slovenia.

16. (SBU) DCM asked Rop to reflect on his time on the international stage and which of his counterparts he most identified with. Rop said he preferred the serious politician, such as Schuessel of Austria, Rasmussen of Denmark and Persson of Sweden to the "performer." It was the rare politician who had both charm and brains. Rop was very complimentary to both President Bush and former President Clinton, both of whom he had met. Rop had very warm memories of his visit to the White House, with new NATO heads of government, with President Bush. The President's personal touch and private tour of the West Wing made quite a positive impression.

COMMENT

17. (C) Despite his defeat in national elections in Fall 2004, Rop appears to have lost none of his political self-assurance. He grew more confident as the lunch wore on, particularly when he discussed economic themes. He was clearly proud of his accomplishments as prime minister and earlier as finance minister, and prior to that as privatization czar. He acknowledged that, as a former PM, he deeply appreciates some of the challenges facing Jansa, which he says, makes it more difficult for him to criticize Jansa publicly. Rop left no doubt that he will be vocal against Slovenian involvement in Iraq. He made it clear that this was as much because he was in opposition now, and the Government would have to "pay a price" politically to implement a new policy on Iraq. The entire conversation drove home that despite defeat, Rop, at least, if not the entire LDS, maintains a Eurocentric view of Slovenia's place in the world. The overall tone of the lunch was friendly and open. Rop should continue to be a good touchstone of center-left views in Slovenia. He certainly seems to believe he'll be leading LDS for some time to come.
ROBERTSON

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